

Odalisque Unbound: Contemporary Photographic Responses

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The legacy of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres for twentieth-century artists is noteworthy. His strangely seductive canvases naturally incite reactions from artists, particularly those interested in portraiture and the female nude. John Baldessari (*Ingres and Other Parables* of 1971), The Guerrilla Girls (*Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* of 1989), and Cindy Sherman (*Untitled #204* of the 1989 *History Portraits* series) considered Ingres a significant departure point for both conceptual and appropriation-based work.¹ In particular, Ingres's *Grand Odalisque* has come to form one of the more significant bases through which Western eyes frame the contemporary female nude. It is my intention here to focus on the cross-cultural examination of Ingres's legacy by three women artists of color working in the United States through the lens of performative photography: Lalla Essaydi, Lorna Simpson, and Renée Cox.² Their work speaks to the legacies of British and French colonialism and to the complex intersections of the framing of race and gender in the United States. By harnessing Minimalism, Conceptual Art, and American popular culture, Essaydi, Simpson, and Cox actively disrupt historical legacy. This process includes drawing in specific cultural references, such as the use of henna and the world of hip hop music, to complicate the gap between the desirous gaze of the viewer and the sphere created by women themselves.³

The circumstances surrounding the commission of *Grande Odalisque* (1814) are perhaps surprising to modern viewers.⁴ The work was produced under the patronage of Napoleon Bonaparte's youngest sister, Caroline Murat who, with her husband, ruled Naples from 1800 to

1815. Caroline Murat was one of several female patrons within the extended Bonaparte family/court who utilized the female nude as a symbol of legitimized feminine patronage.⁵

Though in this sense the work is historically situated as a statement about femininity and power, the image of woman contained in the piece is thoroughly imbued in an Orientalist context, and it is this that is challenged and complicated in the re-presentations of Essaydi, Simpson, and Cox.⁶

Even today limited or misinformed Western views of Arab women continue to linger in both art and popular culture. This can be traced to exotic nineteenth-century nudes, or odalisques, who tended to be framed by Western male artists only within their prescribed roles as slaves or harem girls. However, odalisque translates in Turkish as “belonging to a place,”⁷ a decidedly ambiguous and multivalent conceptual position that can lead to multiple readings involving geography, social rank, or both. In reaction to Orientalists such as Ingres, contemporary Moroccan American photographer and painter, Lalla Essaydi, attacks with her camera in order “to rescue the odalisque from his brutal, pornographic voyeurism.”⁸

It’s obvious to anyone who cares to look that images of the harem and odalisque are still pervasive today, and I am using the female body to complicate assumptions and disrupt the Orientalist gaze. I want the viewer to become aware of Orientalism as a projection of the sexual fantasies of Western male artists, in other words, as a voyeuristic tradition, which involves peering into and distorting private space.⁹

Accordingly, she removes the nudity commonly seen in the nineteenth-century French Romantic works as both a challenge to how such images continue to define Arabic women and as a destabilizing element of subversion. In response, she revisits and re-imagines the Arab female body to reveal “a history often coded in misunderstanding.”¹⁰ In drawing on French painting references and often titling her works in French, Essaydi clearly relates her work to colonial power structures that attempt to define the culture and women presented. In referencing

recognizable but often stereotyped elements of Western media, veiling and language draw the viewer into the spaces created. “My veil is made of words that remind the viewer that a woman is a creature who has her own communication strategy.”¹¹

Using familiar visual cues such as Arabic calligraphy, the veil, and the Orientalist reclining nude, Essaydi offers a renewed response. *Grande Odalisque*, part of the 2008 *Femmes du Maroc* series shot in the artist’s Boston studio with local Moroccan immigrants, destabilizes Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ early nineteenth-century work of the same title. Essaydi positions her sitter reclining on a couch or divan much like Ingres’s model. The subject looks over her right shoulder at the viewer, also echoing the Orientalist original. However, the similarities cease there. While Ingres presents a nude female subject with a fair complexion, clearly a European woman in the guise of an odalisque as the object of desire, Essaydi’s version features a Middle Eastern subject. Also, Essaydi’s female sitter appears clothed, disrupting the contemporary viewer’s desirous gaze. The environment includes pillows and drapery, but none of the other jewel-toned accessories present in Ingres’s *Grande Odalisque*, including the peacock feathered fan and hookah. Leached of vibrant color, Essaydi’s space appears stark and spare in contrast to Ingres, disrupting and questioning the rich, sensual surface qualities associated with Orientalist desire. With text covering every surface, Essaydi’s subject is transformed from a sensual object to one of curiosity for viewers.

The Arabic calligraphy highlights the cultural significance of henna decoration, which traditionally marks the body of women during three specific periods: puberty, marriage and birth of the first child. The use of henna raised suspicion in the Christian world during the Middle Ages due to its association with heresy and witchcraft as a result of its ability to stain the skin

and nails red. Notably, Essaydi's birthplace is located 20 kilometers southwest of Marrakech, one of the world's henna capitals. According to Fatema Mernissi, Essaydi's practice can be connected to multiple traditions with the Middle East that gave women subtle but noteworthy communicative power. Essaydi's calligraphy application relates to *washi*, a medieval technique developed during the ninth century in Baghdad for writing on tissue. This process was used by both men and women, but for very different purposes. Women utilized tissue writing as a way to advertise their seductive charms; whereas men focused on its potential power to communicate political propaganda.¹² Essaydi plays with textural contrast in the implicit contrast between historical tissue writing as a sensual female practice versus painting on canvas, the premier tradition of the male European painter. However, the labor-intensive process involved in applying the calligraphy to skin, clothing, walls, and fabric is likened to painting by Essaydi:

My background in painting plays a very important role in my photographic work. For one thing, applying henna is really a painting process. And because the Arab tradition of calligraphy, which has of course an expressive element, does not involve the kind of separation between image and text you find in the West, the calligraphic element in my work, especially as it is applied in henna, is in my mind closely related to painting.¹³

Notably, the painted surfaces are not consistently fragile and translucent like tissue. The pale surfaces (wall, curtain, bed linens, clothing, skin, etc.) stand in for the tissue, yet even with gauze-like fabrics, the viewer cannot see beneath the surface of the garments of Essaydi's models.

The sitter's expression further distances the viewer with an almost confrontational gaze. She looks directly at the viewer, unlike the submissive subjects of Romanticism who lower their eyes or glance sideways. The subject challenges the onlooker to understand her on her own terms, taking control of the colonizing gaze. Despite the private setting and her reclining

position, she offers neither sexual access, given her modest appearance, nor legibility, given the text-inscribed surfaces. As a result the French historical references of pose and title collide with the Arabic language. This process is further facilitated when the images of her series are subdivided into thirds, which is the case with *Harem Beauty #1*.

By dividing the image into three separate photographs, Essaydi is able to compartmentalize the subject's body. She emphasizes how, through fragmentation, the female body can become fetishized and easily controlled or managed; she is no longer a whole functioning form. Her parts can accommodate specific sexual desires through division into sensual zones: faces and breasts, pubic area, and feet. Varying traditions that highlight binary oppositions collide in attempting to locate the female subject, an affirmation of Essaydi's desire "to convey my own experience as an Arab woman caught somewhere between past and present, East and West."¹⁴ Much like *Grande Odalisque* of 2008, the viewer is presented with the image of a lounging woman inscribed with text. Here the subject's hair is exposed and her head turned more toward the viewer. Exposure of luxurious hair, a marker of female sexuality that would be covered in an exterior location by a Muslim woman, is not complimented by an expression of acquiescence, compliance, or submission despite the subject's entrapment within the three frames. She appears to be lost in thought and does not directly meet the gaze of the viewer.

The title and separation of the image subtly references Western Minimalist or Conceptual models. Essaydi moves back and forth between establishing connections to American and European artistic practices and the historical nature of her images as they relate to constructions of Middle Eastern femininity. The women who appear within these frames are anonymous.

Their individual identities are unknown, much like the nineteenth-century Orientalist subjects that inspired Essaydi's series.

Anonymity of the model/subject is also featured in the work of Lorna Simpson presenting a significant point of comparison. Historically Middle Eastern, African, and African American female bodies have been positioned historically as non-normative, exotic Others meant to affirm the position of the colonizing gaze. Projection of sexual desire onto such bodies could be easily justified within the bounds of conquest.¹⁵ In response to such lingering meta-narratives, in 1986 Simpson began photographing subjects with their faces either turned away from the viewer or cropped out of the photographic frame in 1986; this choice consciously avoids autobiography and allows for multiple readings. As a result, such images are not portraits, but meant to present a more universal black subject. Typically Simpson's models either sit or stand before the viewer directly facing the camera. However, one example presents a more complex arrangement and engagement of traditional photographic viewing standards. *You're Fine* of 1988 presents the viewer with the image of young, black woman lying on a table or bed, with her back towards the audience. Much like the salon nude archetype, her legs are slightly bent at the knee, facilitating an arch of the hip. Such a pose emphasizes and even exaggerates feminine curves. Her hair is loose, and the fingers of one hand run through her tresses. The frame divides the image into four parts, fragmenting her body much like Essaydi's *Harem Beauty #1*.

The model wears a simple white shift resembling a hospital gown. The text that surrounds the fragmented images serves to further substantiate this perspective. Above the model, the words "You're Fine" appear. Directly below "You're Hired" stands in stark contrast. To the right, "Secretarial Position" reads vertically. To the left, a series of medical terms define

the viewing rationale: physical exam, blood test, heart, reflexes, chest x-ray, abdomen, electrocardiogram, urine, lung capacity, eyes, ears, height, and weight. The detailed list of anatomical parts and procedures seems to indicate that this woman is required to undergo a thorough medical evaluation as a requirement for employment, but why such an extensive list? Such a comprehensive examination realistically would only be required of an individual whose job involved physical risk, such as exposure to chemicals or potential for bodily harm. The slightly suggestive pose points to the woman's potential for delivering sexual favors or at least appearing as an attractive office fixture. The portion of the title, *You're Fine*, acknowledges the model's good looks and ability to attract male attention. Also one must note that the "Secretarial Position" she has applied for is not as an administrative assistant but a secretary, a dated and much more gender specific occupation with different expectations and a lack of legal protection against discrimination in the workplace.¹⁶ A double standard is at work here, but does it point to ethnicity, gender, or both? The model's position and accompanying text gradually expose the underside of the erotic gaze as one of sexual violence and rape.¹⁷ Thus, the onlooker becomes the voyeur. The implication of the text paired with the image is that an erotic or seductive component will be part of her position, and due to the extensive physical examination procedures, she is placed under much greater scrutiny than a white woman would be.

Kellie Jones identifies the frame in Lorna Simpson's work as both a severing device and an example of serialization prominent in both Conceptual and Minimalist works.¹⁸ Accordingly, Simpson's work responds to text and multiples as significant art historical mechanisms, but she takes her process a step further with a concurrent interest in photographic truth, a feminist practice that emerged in the 1980s. Artists such as Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman produced

photographic works that engaged gender; however, Simpson employs the additional element of race. As a result of this dynamic and her framing choices of the models she features, the photographs Simpson produces operate as fragmentary signifiers that do not address popular culture notions of the black female body. These strategies differentiate her from Kruger, even though both feature text/image collisions in their work, as Simpson's inclusion of text is more subtle. The words and images often do not operate on equal visual levels. The smaller scale of the text allows the photographs to speak first. The division of the image initially attracts the attention of the viewer. Jones describes "the breaks between [the four panels] almost suggesting where the dissection will commence: the head and shoulders separated from the torso, the legs separated from the feet." Historically this arrangement also references "the use of slaves in medical research, which were often not able bodies, but the ill and maimed who no longer had other roles in the system of production."¹⁹ Due to such historical associations, a marked and divided black body appears that engages multiple conceptual frameworks: biological, political, historical, and linguistic.

Thus the black body appears before the viewer suspended in an environment devoid of context or accessories but dependent on the collection of medical data listed in the surrounding text. The results will determine whether or not she will be deemed acceptable to fill the subsequent post once hired for the secretarial position in question. Her ability to transcend these circumstances, however, comes from her refusal to acknowledge the look of the viewer. Despite being at the mercy of medicine and a potential employer, she does ultimately have a choice. She can decide not to accept the position, but the fact she is willing to undergo such scrutiny

communicates to the viewer that she needs this job and will comply, reluctantly. It is this point that relates Simpson's own experiences to the piece:

You're Fine is about women working day to day to make a living. Most people spend the majority of their lives working. The type of job you have and the demands it makes on you reveals something about your life and the world you live in, as well as defining your status in this country. This particular piece was inspired by all the time I have spent trying to make a living, to produce work and to keep a roof over my head. It made me think about the things people must do to get jobs and survive.²⁰

What makes this statement unique is its resonance for the average female worker. Simpson acknowledges not only the labor involved in producing art, but also the more universal concept of economic survival.

Such strategies, particularly for black women, involve careful negotiation of multiple cultural and class landscapes. In addition, gender and sexuality further complicate how a black woman is seen. Sexual stereotypes continue to influence the construction of black feminine and by extension "color" performative work. From Jezebel to the Hottentot Venus to Josephine Baker, African American female sexuality has long been confined to the areas of curious Other and overly sexed vixen.²¹ Historically, physiognomy has been used to justify these views by emphasizing large backsides, full lips, and overly developed genitals. As a result, the white patriarchal beholder could easily justify his view of her difference and inferiority.

Unfortunately, the marks of colonialism continue to be read upon the body of the black woman. By addressing negative images in their work, however, a powerful act of subversion occurs that allows for black female sexuality to be redefined by women photographers themselves. A more free and fluid sexual self can be created only when desire, eroticism, pleasure, and fulfillment are reframed from a black female perspective, such as the one presented by Renée Cox.

The Jamaican American artist, Renée Cox, who began her career as a fashion photographer, began to create conceptual works involving her nude body while a graduate student at the School of Visual Arts in New York. Fueled by the political turmoil of the mid to late 1980s, she cites Nelson Mandela's release from prison, in particular, as a wake-up call:

If Mandela could endure twenty-seven years of imprisonment, and remain absolutely unwavering about his political commitment, surely I could do better than immerse myself in the trivial world of fashion photography where the most pressing discussions revolved around Donald and Ivana Trump's divorce.²²

By using her own experience, she has been able to claim the right to engage the problematic black female nude. The use of her own body in her work has continued to cause controversy, but for Cox:

Nudity is not about sex, but it's about not hiding anything – it's about coming out as a woman. Nudity cuts away class or money and becomes pure. You put yourself at more of a risk when you're coy and tease people by showing very little. But when you step up to the plate naked, what can they do to you? They can't rape you because you have, in a sense, offered them everything already. There is no chase and there is no game.²³

In completely revealing her body, she takes control of the process of what the black female body signifies without apology.

The works of Renée Cox's *Family Album* show (2001) at the Robert Miller Gallery in New York introduce the viewer into world comprised of rooms that define family in the artist's own terms. According to Jo Anna Isaak's essay for the exhibition catalogue, the show was intended as "an exhibition of desire, its construction and dissemination – sexual, intellectual, material, maternal desire – as well as that peculiarly American desire for self-determination and self-representation."²⁴ In addition to several works that are aggressively sexual and fetishistic where Cox inverts the master/slave dynamic as a dominatrix figure, Cox offered the viewer a number of works in which appropriation of masterworks figures prominently. As counterpoints

to both the master narrative and the masterpiece, Cox places herself in the role of the harem girl, courtesan, and prostitute. Though framed as a group in the *Grand Salon*, not all of the works she appropriates were lauded by the French Salon system. Édouard Manet serves as a primary departure point for most of the images; however, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres makes a brief appearance in order to further contextualize the historical legacy of the salon nude.

In *Baby Back*, Cox also appropriates the well-known nineteenth century Salon nude, *Grande Odalisque*.²⁵ Like Lalla Essaydi, she bases her photograph on the Ingres painting but replaces or changes key items in order to subvert expectations. Cox replicates the pose of Ingres's exotic nude, but in this case Cox's gaze does not meet the eyes of the viewer; she looks off to the side disrupting the power of the viewer's gaze. One might argue that Cox could also be referencing Antonio Canova's portrait of *Paolina Borghese as Venus Victrix*, but significant differences in medium, position of the viewer, and accessories dictate otherwise.²⁶ In contrast, Ingres's odalisque functions as French fantasy inspired by the exoticism of North Africa and the Middle East. It is this colonial element that provokes such photographic responses, especially for Cox and Essaydi (born in Jamaica and Morocco respectively).

Notably, Cox positions her body to both emphasize and accentuate her buttocks, simulating the elongated, Mannerist inspired curvature of *Grande Odalisque's* spine. Her curvaceous bottom becomes the focus in order to celebrate anatomy, rather than condemn or denigrate it. Physical markers of difference still hold meaning, of which Cox is well aware in negotiating her photographic acts of rebellion. "Unlike hair and skin the butt is stubborn, immutable – it can't be hot combed or straightened or bleached into submission. It does not assimilate; it never took a slave name."²⁷ The black female backside, an allusion to the famed

posterior of the Hottentot Venus and a distinct marker of blackness, is overtly emphasized by Cox in order to further complicate her reference to Ingres.

In addition, the accessories of Ingres's *Grande Odalisque* have been pared down to a single item Cox holds in her right hand.²⁸ In *Baby Back*, the fan has been replaced by a whip.²⁹ The loose strands of satin and leather fall against Cox's bright red platform heels.³⁰ Shoes in combination with nudity, a marker of prostitution, and paired with a whip, a sex toy instead of the master's lash, create further historical cross-reference with regard to domination. The slave has become the master, or in this case, the dominatrix. In dramatic fashion, Cox emerges from darkness. She is not located in a specific place, such as the harem interior, as expected. Stripped of Orientalist context, Cox does not easily occupy the Romantic vision of Ingres. The artist's body aggressively replaces the anonymous example of the harem girl French audiences came to expect of salon nudes presented in exotic environments with one that does not conform to either nineteenth-century or contemporary standards.

First and foremost, *Baby Back* is a nod to the historical stereotyped fetishization of the African American female backside of the Hottentot Venus. Saartjie Baartman was persuaded to travel to Europe with the promise of money, but was subsequently relegated to virtual entrapment and curiosity status.³¹ One could also consider *Baby Back* as a fragment of baby back ribs, which frames Cox's form as a piece of juicy meat ready for consumption.³² In addition, the French satirical caricature 'Les Curieux en extase ou les cordons de soulier' circa 1850, which features curious and outlandish comments by three male and one female onlooker, includes 'Oh! Goddam, what roast beef' on the far left.³³ The soldier reaches out with his left hand in an attempt to touch, squeeze, or fondle the Hottentot on display as her backside faces

him. She does not look back but at the viewer. This nineteenth century caricature positions the Hottentot as a consumer good, but because her body is not ideal and on display, the onlooker can touch without shame. With *Baby Back*, Cox is in control of the image making process, not a victim of display without recourse. By positioning herself in such a manner, she acknowledges the history of curiosity display. By combining visual scrutiny, colonial authority, and popular culture, Cox places her own image within a dialogue of critique. She also alludes to the continuing legacy of emphasizing racial difference. Patricia Hill Collins argues that the ample behind has been co-opted or fragmented in order to support the ongoing appetite for the sexualized and exotic Other. As a result, the big butt signals Otherness. Cox's image becomes especially subversive in this regard, because she is not smiling, refusing to acknowledge mainstream views. Such rebelliousness connects Cox to hip hop culture as central to her own artistic practice.

The intersection of hip-hop and gender has emerged as an area fraught with controversy since the explosion of gangsta rap on the music scene in the late 1980s. Both Reiland Rabaka's *Hip Hop's Inheritance: From the Harlem Renaissance to the Hip Hop Feminist Movement* (2011) and Part IV of Mark Anthony Neal and Murray Forman's *That's the Joint!: The Hip Hop Studies Reader* (2004) offer significant discussion of gender. Neal discusses substantive evidence surrounding the creation of both normative and non-normative roles for women within hip hop culture. What has been overlooked in contemporary American art historical discourse are the more subtle references that connect the political milieu of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century to the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and the musical connections to protest songs in African American culture.³⁴ Neal draws attention to the work of

UCLA ethnomusicologist Cheryl L. Keyes, who has identified distinct types of female rappers: Queen Mother, Fly Girl, and Sista with Attitude. It is my assertion that these categories can be particularly useful when considered in relation to the work of Renée Cox.

Keyes mentions a raptivist model within the Queen Mother category, one that advocates racial, social, and economic parity. I would argue that Cox also conceives of her work as an ongoing project of activism in the guise of cultural critique. Fly, a term which grew out of the blaxploitation films of the late 1960s through the mid-1970s, describes an individual, male or female, who wears chic clothing and fashionable hairstyles, jewelry, etc.³⁵ Cox's dreadlocks serve as the primary indicator of her fly style. The late 1980s and early 1990s equivalent takes fly a step further. The Fly Girl wants the viewer to see her ability, but she also speaks her mind. She uses her body and her mind to "flip the script," so to speak. The Fly Girl also harnesses the power of the erotic, which is ultimately where primary controversy lies.³⁶ The final category is "Sista with Attitude." Keyes draws on Geneva Smitherman's ideas to position attitude, or "tude" as aggressive, arrogant, and defiant; this is someone who embodies what it is to be fierce. By extension, a woman who overtly attempts to unhinge patriarchal rule epitomizes a fierce attitude. She is often seen as a bitch, but despite these qualities, which are often interpreted as negative, the Sista with Attitude is both strong and positive in asserting herself.

Renée Cox, like other female performing artists, conflates these categories and shifts between Queen Mother, Fly Girl, and Sista with Attitude. Which category comes to the fore depends upon the photographic series, the underlying goals of a particular photograph, and how the media responds to her work. These shifts include her strategies vis-à-vis the popular press and the gallery/museum system.³⁷ While Cox has ignited debates about obscenity due to the

presence of her nude body in her work, she uses her body strategically to reference historical images. In order for the public to truly recognize injustice, Cox leads the way in her interrogation of art and history. The difficult process of that journey is what unites the artists discussed herein. It is through their eyes that the viewer can truly appreciate how colonial legacy continues to weigh on the minds of artists of color working in the United States. What makes their choices to directly confront canonical works of art with non-white female bodies especially relevant is the complexity of reference points they use to direct the audience's attention to persistent problems of defining image making.

Lalla Essaydi, Lorna Simpson, and Renée Cox exemplify American cultural diversity. Their photographic work testifies to the continuing presence of ethnic multiplicity in the United States, and offers new ways of depicting women that directly engage dominant views. By challenging the Orientalist European standard of the nineteenth century salon nude that continues to affect how women of color see themselves represented, both in fine art and popular culture, they serve as examples of resistance to the pervasive Western art canon. Though this struggle is echoed in the work of their contemporaries such as John Baldessari, the Guerrilla Girls, and Cindy Sherman, the additional element of engaging views of ethnicity further complicates the process of examination. By harnessing language and cultural traditions that combine Western and non-Western motifs, the photographs they produce push the limits of acceptable viewing relationships, long constituted within Western white men's viewing of Otherness. In seeing the possibilities of deconstructing Ingres's *Grande Odalisque* and re-presenting his work in rich and multi-faceted modes, Essaydi, Simpson, and Cox speak to the ongoing problems of representing the non-white body in positive and uplifting ways.

¹ The identification of Ingres as a source of twentieth century modernism, one seen as revolutionary, violent, and ill-disciplined is notable within the context of this discussion. In the December 2000 special issue of *Art History*, both Karen L. Kleinfelder (“Ingres as a Blasted Allegory”) and Roger Benjamin (“Ingres Chez Les Fauves”) address the pervasive reference to Ingres by modern and contemporary artists. Furthermore, the reinvestigation of his works by several contemporary artists and art historians legitimizes ongoing critical analyses. See Carol Ockman, *Ingres’s Eroticized Bodies: Retracing the Serpentine Line* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) for further discussion.

² I use the term performative to frame photography in relation to Judith Butler’s discussion of gender construction. She asserts that gender is performative, because “it is real only to the extent that it is performed.” See Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Construction: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in *Performing Feminisms*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 278.

³ Of note here are significant differences in where and in what capacities these artists have exhibited their work. Essaydi’s work has been shown internationally and on the East Coast of the United States. Lorna Simpson has been the subject of major museum exhibitions, including retrospectives. Renée Cox has shown in Europe and in New York, including the Brooklyn Museum. As a result, audiences have varied significantly. Though Simpson and Cox have been extensively framed within an African American context and are well-known to specialists in this area, Essaydi’s work has been contextualized quite differently. Her work has been addressed only within Middle Eastern and Arab frameworks. I would argue that despite the different circles of dialogue that circulate around their work, unexplored commonalities involving the female body exist that are worthy of cross-cultural examination.

⁴ In another letter addressed to the count of Narbonne-Pelet, French ambassador to Naples, further evidence can be found regarding the image of Murat and Ingres’s decision to sidestep problematic assertions of feminine power: “Some kind people, of whom there are many in this world, have spread the word that I intended to depict Mme Murat in this painting. This is absolutely false; my model is in Rome, it’s a ten-year-old girl who modeled, and besides, those who knew Mme Murat can judge me.” See Hans Naef, “Deux dessins d’Ingres, Monseigneur Cortois de Pressigny et le chevalier de Fontenay,” *Revue de l’art*, no. 6 (1957): 248.

⁵ Ockman makes the argument clear in her comparative discussion of Ingres’s *Grande Odalisque* in relation to Antonio Canova’s *Paolina Borghese as Venus Victrix* (1804-8) and Jacques-Louis David’s *Mme Récamier* (1800).

⁶ Edward Said’s *Orientalism* of 1978 initiated significant and subsequent critique of the treatment Middle Eastern cultures and non-white bodies in colonial discourse. Conceptually Linda Nochlin identifies Orientalism in Western literature “as a mode for defining the presumed cultural inferiority of the Islamic Orient ... part of the vast control mechanism of colonialism, designed to justify and perpetuate European dominance.” For further discussion, see Linda Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient,” in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1989).

⁷ Ray Waterhouse, “Lalla Essaydi: An Interview,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 24 (2009) : 146.

⁸ Fatema Mernissi, “Lalla Essaydi: A Spinner of Scenarios More Dangerous than Scheherazade,” in Femmes du Maroc, exh. cat. (New York: Rizzoli, 2009), 14.

⁹ Waterhouse, 148.

¹⁰ Artist’s Statement. See www.anyaatishgallery.com for further information.

¹¹ Mernissi, 12.

¹² Mernissi, 9.

¹³ Ray Waterhouse, “Lalla Essaydi: An Interview,” Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art, no. 24 (2009) : 144. What is notable is her discussion of text versus image relationships in art is that she relates her work to contemporary conceptual art, not manuscript illumination, which also offers the viewer an enhanced visual relationship to the words presented.

¹⁴ Artist’s Statement. See www.anyaatishgallery.com for further information.

¹⁵ For a larger discussion of the treatment of the black female body in nineteenth-century French art, see Griselda Pollock Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁶ Traditionally women secretaries often served as surrogate wives and/or mothers for their male bosses. In addition, their duties would often extend into the sexual arena. Because of the lack of legal recourse available and the very different social mores that existed before the 1980s, most women had to accept such limitations for the sake of job security. For further discussion, see Lynn Peril, Swimming in the Steno Pool: A Retro Guide to Making It in the Office (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2011).

¹⁷ Beryl J. Wright, “Back Talk: Recoding the Body,” in Lorna Simpson: For the Sake of the Viewer, exh. cat. Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992): 13.

¹⁸ Kellie Jones, “(Un) Seen & Overheard: Pictures by Lorna Simpson,” in Lorna Simpson (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2002), 34.

¹⁹ Jones, 33.

²⁰ Lorna Simpson, “Interview with Deborah Willis, 1992,” in Lorna Simpson (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2002), 126.

²¹ Saartjie Baartman, better known as the Hottentot Venus, was persuaded to travel to Europe with the promise of money, but was subsequently relegated to virtual entrapment and curiosity status. Both exhibited as entertainment in a cage and studied as a scientific specimen, Baartman became the fascinated focus of Georges Cuvier. While Baartman was on exhibition at the Museum of Natural History in Paris in 1815, two watercolor illustrations were commissioned. Though never exhibited fully nude, Baartman was persuaded to pose naked for the illustrations. Her premature death at the age of 25 enabled even further scrutiny, with her genitals being the primary focus of dissection. After subjecting Baartman to a thorough postmortem investigation of her so-called “abnormal” physique, Cuvier published his findings in 1817 and again in 1824 with the accompanying illustrations. The text and renderings of Baartman draw attention to her large and protruding buttocks, thought to be a marker of physiological and sexual difference. It is through continued response to the legacy of these watercolors that the legendary status of the Hottentot Venus lives on in the work of African American artists, particularly women.

²² B.E. Myers, “What is my Legacy?: Transient Consciousness and the “Fixed” Subject in the Photography of Renée Cox,” in Gendered Visions: the Art of Contemporary Africana Women Artists, exh. cat. (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1997), 31.

²³ Myers, 32.

²⁴ Jo Anna Isaak, Introduction essay of Renee Cox: American Family. exh. cat.. (New York: Robert Miller Gallery, 2001), unpaginated.

²⁵ Carla Williams has identified *Baby Back* as having been inspired by Manet's *Olympia*, but not Ingres's *Grande Odalisque*. However, Williams does recognize Cox's uncanny ability to flip the script by restaging art history on her own terms. See the Introduction of Deborah Willis' Posing Beauty: African American Images from the 1890s to the Present (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2009) for a fuller discussion on the evolution of African American beauty standards in popular culture.

²⁶ Cox's divan is one sided, while the couch Borghese reclines on lacks arms allowing one to sit from either side of the furniture. Also, the three-dimensional nature of the sculpture further complicates the viewing relationship of the work; whereas the two-dimensional photographic works more closely simulate the spectator's position with regard to the painting. Though one could view Pauline Borghese from behind, this is not the ideal or intended viewing position. In addition, Canova presents Pauline Borghese's portrait as Venus, a distinctly Western classical reference point.

²⁷ Erin J. Aubry, "The Butt: Its Politics, Its Profanity, Its Power," in Body Outlaws: Young Women Writer About Body Image and Identity, ed. Ophira Edut (Seattle: Seal Press, 2000), 28.

²⁸ Paulina Borghese also holds a single item, but the golden apple from The Judgment of Paris, a symbol of the beauty contest she won when judged by Paris, bears no resemblance to the sex toy Cox clutches.

²⁹ A similar whip or cat o'nine tails was also used by Lorraine O'Grady in her *Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire* 1955 performance of 1981 at the opening of the "Personae" show at the New Museum of Contemporary Art. Dressed as a beauty pageant contestant, complete with crown, evening gown, and sash, she overtly criticized the exclusion of women and artists of color in the museum system. The performance was also a call to action for black artists to take more risks. The documentation of the performance, as well as her costume, was included in the WACK! show of 2005. Though very subtle, this nod to O'Grady as an artist and cultural critic speaks to Cox's mastery of the postmodern remix.

³⁰ Symbolically, red is a color of love and passion; however, because Cox appears nude wearing heels, a signal of love for sale is suggested. In Édouard Manet's *Olympia* of 1863, model Victorine Meurent staged as a prostitute receiving a client also wears shoes.

³¹ The story of Saartjie Baartman has been researched and contextualized extensively, most notably by Deborah Willis in Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot". I would like to extend the discussion of the black female nude here to other areas not yet fully considered, namely archetypes within feminist hip hop music.

³² Cox's *Baby Back* is also analyzed in Nicole R. Fleetwood, Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011). However, Fleetwood cites several of Cox's works in order to support her assessment of hypervisibility as a strategy for not only artists, but female entertainers/musicians as well. Little attention is paid to the multi-faceted historical reference points Cox makes because of a larger overarching focus on excess flesh.

³³ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 181.

³⁴ An exception can be made with John P. Bowles's Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011). However, because this is a monograph that examines a specific body of work with one woman's artistic practice, the discussion and contextualization ends in 1975.

³⁵ Cheryl L. Keyes, "Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity via Rap Music Performance," in That's the Joint!,: The Hip Hop Studies Reader, eds. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), 269.

³⁶ The problematic nature of the black female nude remains an area of scholarship rife with controversy across disciplines. In attempting to use the theoretical standpoint of black women to unlock some of the problems, individual experiences of the authors can affect a full analysis of the dynamics at play. In addition, the citation of black lesbian scholars and writers such as Audre Lorde, has been used to grapple with the appearance of erotic imagery from a female perspective. This is especially problematic, because it assumes that woman-centered heterosexual and homosexual desires are one and the same.

³⁷ Cox's *Yo Mama* series culminated in the now infamous *Yo Mama's Last Supper* shown at the "Committed to the Image: Contemporary Black Photographers" exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2001. Cox's positioning of herself in the center as Christ engulfed both the museum and the artist in controversy when condemned by then major of New York, Rudy Giuliani.